

## LOCAL LORE AND LATIN SCIENCE IN OLD NORSE GEOGRAPHY

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Special interest of medieval Scandinavians in the geography of the world was tightly connected with their oversea activities. Thousands of voyages brought rich practical experience and knowledge of topography and geographical peculiarities of the countries visited. The viking oecumene embraced lands from the shores of North America to the Middle Volga region and the Caspian sea, and from Polar Ocean islands to North Africa. Though unfixed in the written form, this information was still preserved and found its way into the stories about the deeds of the vikings and constituted a large bulk of geographical lore. At the same time the cosmogonical and cosmological conceptions together with the spatial organization of the world developed in mythological lore.

In the IIth century together with Christianity a new type of culture was introduced in Scandinavia which, among other things, possessed a geography and cosmology of its own. It was a fusion of antique and biblical traditions which took its medieval form after several centuries of adaptation of Greek and Roman geography by Christian ontology and gnoceology. By the IIth century the process of selection, transformation and re-interpretation of Late Roman geographical conceptions, as well as integration of factual data came to its end, and there emerged a new, Christian model of the universe and the earth.

The penetration of the Christian model of the world put forward the task of its coordination with the existing geo-

graphical and cosmological lore. Earlier, in other 'barbarian' countries the Christian model of the world superimposed the local ones and forced them out into the periphery of the culture. In Old Norse geography (as well as in many other spheres of culture) the result was different: the two cultures interacted and interlaced, so that in the 12-14th centuries the local lore, enriched by Latin science and modified by the Christian world model, still constituted the basis of geographical knowledge.

These centuries were immensely productive in the field of literary activities, geographical writings being no exception. The knowledge of the oecumene manifested itself most apparently in two literary forms: in sagas and in specialized geographical literature. As the latter was not studied as a whole since N. Beckmann and Kr. Kålund, it seems desirable to give a brief survey of it.

Old Norse geographical literature comprises several groups of treatises. The first includes four general descriptions of the world: 'Hversu lǫnd liggja í veröldenum' (in Hauksbók) and a later revision of it with additions (in AM 764, 4<sup>o</sup>); 'Landalýsing I' (in AM 194, 4<sup>o</sup>) and partially depending on it 'Landalýsing II' (in AM 764, 4<sup>o</sup>). According to the analysis of the texts and their interrelations the earliest among them is 'Landalýsing I' which was composed between 1170 and 1190. 'Landalýsing II' can be dated to the beginning of the 14th century. 'Hversu lǫnd' seems to be written not earlier than the second half of the 13th century, though it uses earlier sources.

The second group presents 'Christian geography': it comprises smaller treatises on paradise, on the division of the earth

between the sons of Noah and a large geographical compendium in 'Stjórn'. The third consists of small geographical notes of different origin and content: from lists of fiords in Iceland to descriptions of marvelous lakes and monstrous peoples. The itineraries to the Holy Land, Rome and Constantinople form the fourth group, the earliest extant being the 'diary' of Nikúlas of Munkathvera, whose voyage took place in 1150ths.

The geography of the treatises and of the sagas belong to different types of world perception and systems of description of the world. The geographical conceptions reflected in them are based on different sources and traditions.

The former derive from Latin scientific literature and present the results of activities of learned Icelanders most of whom had Christian education. Their goal was to preserve, reproduce and pass to posterity the achievements of their notable predecessors who revealed the divine wisdom in creating and functioning of the world. The Old Norse geographers had access to the most important Latin writings in the field. Among Latin books encountered in inventories of church and cloister libraries in Iceland, Norway and Sweden there were manuscripts of the works that gave shape to medieval geography: 'Ethymologiae' of Isidor of Seville, 'De imagine mundi' of Honorius Augustodunensis, 'Speculum naturale' of Vincentius Bellovacensis, etc. The influence of these books on geographical thought in Scandinavia was large. The general descriptions of the world reveal direct dependance on 'Ethymologiae' and 'De imagine mundi' in their structure, composition, information. The parts devoted to Asia and Africa are mostly quotations from Isidor or Honorius. A number of smaller treatises

present translations of extracts from 'Ethymologiae' dealing with such topics as monstrous peoples.

The sagas use for the most part local lore, results of personal experience accumulated during a long period of time. But it remained unsystematized and was dispersed in the form of separate mentions and rare descriptions of some localities. The mixture of pieces of real knowledge and fantastic notions creates a diffused background for the story and is strictly subordinated to it. Even larger and more consistent descriptions, such as surveys of Finnmark in 'Egils saga' or Denmark in 'Knytlinga saga' are tightly connected with the narrative. The geographical knowledge of the sagas outlines the viking oecumene, the territories they reached during their voyages. It is accurate and detailed when the story deals with the lands inhabited or much visited by northmen and becomes dim and confused while speaking about more distant lands. On the outskirts of the viking oecumene there appear fantastic countries and peoples (such as Bjalkaland in 'Örvar-Odds saga' or lands in the South-East in 'Yngvars saga víðförlí').

However the learned and the everyday geographies were not isolated. Their interaction and diffusion were profound and involved many aspects of geographical thought and knowledge. But up to the 14th century there appear the supremacy of local perception of the world to be kept.

West-European geography that penetrated into Scandinavia was Christian in its nature and developed under pressing influence of theology. Its theoretical foundation based on fundamental Christian conceptions of creation, omnipotence of the creator, divine will as the cause of all natural phenomena. All these conceptions were adopted as part of Christian learn-

ing, but remained alien to the mind of Old Norse geographers. Most of them simply ignore all theoretical problems. The author of 'Landalýsing II' is the only one who evidenced his acquaintance with them. Exposing his purpose in writing the description of the world he states that he is going to present the events from the time when "guð skapaði veröldina" and needs the geographical setting for them which he has found "i bokum skilríkum". His 'Landalýsing' begins with a confusing statement: "Röksamlig skipan fornrar vizku nefir sva ok heldr, at viderni heimsbygðarinnar er sundrskipt i þrja hluta...", which contains but hints on the cardinal conceptions of Christian geography. The most important is the conception of the 'reasonable order' in nature, a conception which he might have borrowed from the 'trustworthy books', i.e. 'Ethymologiae' judging by its usage in compiling the description itself. Still the term 'vizka' might as well denote the traditional wisdom, the lore of his ancestors.

The only one who took pains to elaborate on the matter was Snorri Sturluson who wrote in his prologue to the prosaic *Edda*: Almáttigr guð skapadi himin ok jörð ok alla þá hluti er þeim fylgja, ok sidarst menn tvá er ættir eru frá komnar... Af þvílíkum hlutum grunadi þá at nokkurr mundi vera stjórnari himintunglanna sá er stilla mundi gang þeira at vilja sínum, ok mundi sávera ríkr mjök ok máttugr; ok þess væntu þeir, ef hann réði fyrir höfuðskepnunum, at hann mundi fyrr verit hafa en himintunglin; ok þat sá þeir, ef hann réði gang himintunglanna, at hann mundi réða skini sólar ok dagg loptsins ok ávexti jarðarinnar er því fylgir, ok slíkt sama vindinum loptsins ok þar með stormi sævarins".

Snorri stresses the cardinal conceptions of Christian na-

turphilosophy: the creation of the world, the existence of all natural phenomena through and due to the divine will, the dependence of the world order on the premeditated design of the creator.

So, in spite of the importance of these conceptions for the Christian learning and through it for West-European geography, they seem to produce very little impact on Old Norse geographical thought. Besides the above mentioned general statements, they were never applied to the discussions of geographical problems. The field of interests of Scandinavian geographers did not coincide with that of their learned predecessors and was delineated by the local traditions.

The approach to geographical matters of saga-tellers and saga-writers was mainly practical. The great bulk of the knowledge of the oecumene was constituted by topographical data and by information about sea and river routes, towns and cities where trade interactions were conducted, and peoples the vikings came across during their voyages. The preponderance of practical interests conditioned the usage of West-European geographical writings. Well acquainted with Isidor's 'Etymologiae' the authors of the descriptions of the world avoid rendering his exposition of the universe and natural phenomena in Book XIII. On the contrary Book XIV which is devoted to the description of the world becomes the model according to which the Old Norse 'Landalýsingar' are composed. Their authors follow the structure of Isidor's chorography: they outline the division of the Earth into three parts and then tell about different geographical objects in each part in turn starting with Asia. Most of the details told about Asia and Africa are borrowed

from Isidor (or else Honorius who in his turn based on Isidor with minor changes) in the form of direct quotations.

But the picture changes the moment they come to the description of Europe, especially Northern and Eastern parts of it. At the time of Isidor, as well as Honorius these regions were almost 'terrae incognitae' for West-European geographers. But for some general and sometimes contradicting bits of information, partially going back to antiquity, they had or included in their works no information whatsoever. For Scandinavians these were native or much travelled about lands. Contrary to their West-European predecessors who avoided including new information on principle grounds Scandinavian geographers make as much as possible out of their personal experience. The author of 'Hversu lönd' is much interested in East Europe and enumerates as many as eight cities in Russia, ten peoples and lands situated on the Baltic. The person who composed 'Landalýsing I' expresses apparent interest and knowledge of Scandinavian countries with special stress on church geography. Even the treatise on the sons of Noah based on Book IX of 'Ethymologiae' includes enumeration of East and North European countries as belonging to several sons of Iapheth.

Thus eliminating all theoretical questions, borrowing the general structure of chorographic description and supplementing the information by local lore the Old Norse geographers remodel and adapt the European heredity to their own requirements and interests.

The selection of geographical conceptions and information was the most important means of absorbing Latin geography. At the same time the Old Norse geographers seek to unite it whenever possible with local tradition. The treatises abound in ex-

planations of place-names through their Scandinavian counterparts, such as: "Ruzcia... þat kollum ver Gardariki" ('Aversu lönd'), "Konstantinopolim... kalla menn Miclagard" (ibid.), etc. The most consistent line of such pairs is constructed by Snorri in his summary of the 'learned history' of Scandinavian peoples in prosaic Edda: he equates the learned names "Enea" with Europe, "Troja" with Tyrkland, "Thrakia" with Þrúðheimr. In this way he draws the bookish place-names into the context of Scandinavian model of the world and translates one system into another.

The same translation occurs in numerous cases of identification of the 'learned' geographical conceptions with those inherent to the local mythological lore on the basis of their likeness in one or more aspects. The most apparent example is adaptation of the conception of world ocean which in four streams surrounds the oecumene and the other three continents (the so-called Crates theory). In a way this conception has common features with the mythological universe of Scandinavians where the land is thought to be surrounded by an "outer sea" (umsjóð). The treatise 'Gripla' tells about a sea, "þvi er Mare Oceanium heiter, þar hverfur um allan heim", and identifies its part that lies between Vinland and Greenland with Ginnungagap - the abyss of Scandinavian mythology. The author of 'Gripla' seems aware of the world ocean theory, he even uses the Latin term to designate the outer sea, but the mythological universe is still alive for him and he combines both conceptions and by introducing mythological connotations remodel the Crates theory. Identification of the Ocean (or its part) with Ginnungagap which represents also the primordial chaos seems to reveal that he conceived it not as regular water streams of ancient geographers, but as chaotic unregulated stretch of water which puts limits

to the habitable world.

In 'Ynglingasaga' Snorri deals also with the problem, but he avoids any direct mythological connotations. Still his perception of "umsjóðr" is much closer to the mythological conception than to its 'learned' counterpart. For Snorri it is a sea (haf) that surrounds the oecumene and divides it in three continents (the latter is in full agreement with ancient and medieval geography). Snorri's way of adaptation of this conception is its simplification and reduction to something close, if not similar, to the mythological one.

Contrary to the ocean theory the conception of latitudinal zones and their habitability seems to be adopted unchallenged, though again somewhat distorted by simplification. Snorri who dealt with it more thoroughly than any other separated not five (as in Cratesian-Macrobian theory basical for medieval geography), but only three zones occupied by one of the three continents: Africa the southern and hot one, Asia the intermediate and temperate one, and Europe the northern and cold one. In accordance with West-European geography he writes that the southernmost and the northernmost parts are uninhabitable because of the heat and cold respectively (prosaic Edda). At the same time the northern boundaries of the oecumene become transferred much to the north. 'Landalýsing I' considers Bjarmaland unknown to western geographers to be the farthest habitable land: "af Biarmalandi ganga lond obygd of norðr-ett, unz vid-tekr Grenland". This piece of information is purely local and it fluently supplements the borrowed scheme.

Thus, the intensive interaction of the two different systems of geographical knowledge in Scandinavia in the 12-14th centu-

ries led to their contamination with the dominating role of the local tradition. The West-European Christian geography undergoes strict selection determined by the interests and needs of local geographers, it is simplified and sometimes reduced to traditional mythological conceptions. At the same time it greatly expands the viking oecumene introducing information (though partially fantastic) about lands that were unknown to Scandinavians and provides a more systematic and organized view of the world. Paramount importance of practical orientation of Old Norse geography during the Viking age resulted in penetration in geographical descriptions of a large stream of new information based on personal experience of generations of Scandinavians. It did not change the Christian model of the world, but did make it much closer to reality and capable of absorbing new data and ideas.

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